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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001844

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STATE FOR NEA/ARP, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#) [NATIONAL](#) [ASSEMBLY](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: PARLIAMENT DISSOLUTION PRESENTS
BOTH OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

REF: KUWAIT 1833 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: Elections for a new National Assembly will take place on June 29, almost certainly on the basis of the status quo 25 constituencies. Reformers who rejected a compromise offer of 10 constituencies in order to hold out for their proposed 5 constituency model, will now attempt to make their case to a fractured electorate. While some Western media commentators are already suggesting that the dissolution of the Kuwaiti Parliament is a setback for democratization, that analysis is not prevalent here and misses the larger picture of what is happening in Kuwait. Reformers are focused on the opportunity presented by the dissolution of Parliament and are eager to use the upcoming election to advance their agenda. (SEPTEL will report in more detail local reactions to the decision.)

¶2. (C) What the dissolution of Parliament means for our Freedom Agenda will only gradually become apparent as the electoral races heat up and as a newly elected Parliament establishes its relationship with the government. We expect the next five weeks to be marked by a vibrant demonstration of the democratic process at work in Kuwait. Given the immediacy of the elections, we do not see a significant opportunity for programming in support of the election process. We may hear some requests for technical assistance from individual candidates. In such a case, USG interests would be best-served by pointing candidates in the direction of sources of assistance, which they could contract for as they see fit. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (C) Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah exercised his constitutional powers and dissolved Parliament on May 21 after a standoff over electoral reform reached an impasse (ref A). New parliamentary elections in which Kuwaiti women will participate for the first time since being granted full political rights in May 2005 are scheduled for June 29. Most reports indicate that the elections will be conducted on the basis of the current 25-constituency electoral system. While it is within his legal right, it is unlikely that the Amir will issue a decree reducing the number of constituencies prior to June 29 given the administrative and logistical challenges, though he may issue decrees on other, less controversial issues.

¶4. (C) With women voting, the average number of voters per constituency will rise from 5,500 to more than 11,000, diminishing the potential for electoral corruption, such as vote-buying and vote-transferring, which has marred previous elections. A member of the ruling family in the Amir and Prime Minister's inner circle told the Ambassador recently that one of the reasons for a dissolution of Parliament (which he had then expected would be inevitable by November) was to remind the political system that the Amir can and will

employ this constitutional prerogative when he deems it necessary. Most Kuwaitis were neither surprised or upset by the dissolution, viewing it as an almost inevitable outcome of the current divisions.

15. (C) While we need to be cautious about our own instant analysis, the dissolution presents both opportunities and challenges to the Freedom Agenda. This Parliament was marked by corruption, favoritism, and inaction on important legislation; its dissolution is not necessarily a bad thing. The ad hoc coalition of 29 liberal and conservative MPs supporting 5 constituencies versus the Government's 10 effectively framed the debate as a battle between reform and corruption. Seen by many as heroes, these MPs will likely make anti-corruption the main issue of their election campaigns. If they are re-elected, it could be with a clear mandate for reform. The public debate over electoral reform has also increased Kuwaitis' awareness of the problems of the current electoral system. Coupled with the increased number of voters, these factors may make it more difficult for the Government to manipulate electoral outcomes.

16. (C) Some reform organizations, like the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, and the minor Kuwait Society for Developing Democracy, may reiterate their previous calls for international election monitors to observe the elections. (Note: The use of election observers is a very sensitive issue for most Kuwaitis who equate observers with the fledgling democracies of developing countries and take umbrage at the suggestion that observers could add legitimacy to the Kuwaiti electoral process. We recommend that U.S. officials not introduce the topic. End note.) The voting process itself is well-organized and respected in Kuwait.

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Distortions are introduced through an unregulated campaign finance system and the ability to influence individual voters in the small districts.

17. (C) Some members of the ruling family and the Government will want a clear majority of pro-Government MPs in Parliament to ensure they can pass key legislation, such as the Kuwait Project (development of the northern oil fields), during the next four years. If it chooses to, the Government can bring to bear significant resources to assist sympathetic candidates. There is also a significant chance that Islamist representation in Parliament will increase. Islamists are better organized and better funded than other political groups. (Note: The Government does not officially recognize political parties. End note.) They are also likely to benefit most from the women's vote since a majority of women are expected to support Islamist candidates.

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